

Sunday 24 September 2006: Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Do not be false to the truth

Readings: James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

One day, when I was about 9 years old, I solemnly asked my parents how much they were prepared to invest in my tennis career. A fortnight of Wimbledon on TV and the thought of gracing that turf and lifting the Ladies singles trophy aloft temporarily displaced my only other longing of the time – to be a Vet – from the top of my ambition tree. My Dad, throwing natural caution to the wind, responded to my request by offering one of his prized possessions – a book of Green Shield stamps. Some of you might remember Green shield stamps as tokens you collected every time you filled up with petrol at certain garages and could then turn into all sorts of small items from the Green shield catalogue. For some reason the LTA joined up with Green Shield stamps to offer 6 tennis lessons in local parks. So we duly cashed in the book of Green shield stamps and had my lessons with about 20 other children on the red cinder and pothole strewn courts of Bedwellty Park, Tredegar. I'd like to be able to say that but for the fact that it rained the week we were supposed to be learning the serve, my name would now be on the honours board at Wimbledon. I'd like to be able to say that but I suspect the truth is that lack of talent may have had more to do with it.

Ambition – the earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction is not something we leave behind with childhood. It is I guess, a natural human instinct. What we aspire to or seek after is often what motivates us, even if we can't always articulate our aspirations or desires.

Ambition, is, I think, morally neutral. It's neither intrinsically good nor bad to have longings, desires, hopes that inspire us and cause us to strive for what we want – it's just how we are. Yet most of us feel rather ambivalent about being described as "ambitious", feeling it rather distasteful to be seen as too overt in our desire to succeed or to get what we want. You can see something of that ambivalence and that distaste in the rather embarrassed reaction of the disciples in the Gospel reading today:

Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

Yesterday, our Parochial Church Council held its annual Awayday. We were working on the process of developing a new Mission Action Plan, something to focus and direct our life together as a community over the next few years. We called the day "What do we really, really want to be? And how?" and we began by exploring what we saw as our deepest desires for this community. Perhaps we could have asked what are we ambitious for in this community? And I guess if we had we could have come up with answers like: "To be the biggest church in London" or "To be the richest church in London" or "To be the best or the most forward thinking or the most active church in London." We could, possibly, have come up with any of those answers, but I'm sure regular members of the congregation will be relieved to hear, we didn't.

Instead we talked about our desire to be a God-centred community, a community of vision, a prophetic and challenging community, a community focussed on being a witness to the Kingdom of God rather than just to building a church, We talked about being a community of connectedness, rooted in our location here at the heart of London and reaching out beyond ourselves to embrace our wider relationships. We talked about being a community of healing and reconciliation and a place of refuge and comfort.

And I hope that we expressed our desires in those terms rather than in terms of being the biggest or the best because somewhere inside, even if we can't articulate it lies an ambition, a longing a yearning for something other than ourselves – perhaps what the writer of the letter of James might have described as “an ambition for the truth”
do not be boastful and false to the truth

If we had gone down the path of defining our desires in terms of the best or the biggest, I can't help wondering if our discomfort may have arisen, because, in ways we perhaps can't quite put our finger on, we would have found ourselves being false to the truth.

Last week Nick talked about the mixed reactions people have to the letter of James. As he's not here this morning, I can admit that my reaction to this letter, has more in coming with Martin Luther who called it “an epistle of straw” than the Quaker George Fox to whom it spoke powerfully of a practical and rooted Christianity. But even I have to admit that here James sees to be saying something that cuts through much of the pious moralising that he's so often prone to:
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And he goes on to talk about the ways in which being false to the truth can lead to the disputes and conflicts that arise when selfish ambition pits us one against another.

Yesterday, we as a PCC didn't stop at just expressing our desires for this community. “What do we really, really want to be?” we asked ourselves but also added “And how?” By adding that question we flagged up that the harder challenge, is not just finding the truths on which we might express as our deepest desire and longings – the harder challenge is learning how to live out those desires. The harder challenge is holding ourselves accountable to the truths and longings at our heart. The harder challenge is allowing those truths and longings at our heart to inform and direct all we do day by day. The harder challenge is to continue to be true to our deepest desires even when to do so leads us into uncomfortable places or confronts us with risks and courses of action we'd rather not face.

Jesus was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Three times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples of his own costly path of following the deepest desires of his own heart – of following the call of love at the depth of his being – the love that binds together Father, Son and Spirit. Three times Jesus tells them that to follow such a longing will lead him to betrayal, suffering and death. Each time Jesus follows up that prediction of his own passion with further teaching on the relevance of this for the life of discipleship. And each time, his words are met with bewilderment or flat denial.

Today we heard the second – and starkest – of these passion predictions, and Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand what he was saying but, with perhaps hint of irony, adds “and were afraid to ask”. Perhaps after all, they knew only too well what Jesus was saying

and were afraid what it might cost them. Here Jesus confronts them with what it means in terms of their own ambitions or seeking after positions of power and leadership.

He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

By contrasting the upside values of the kingdom with the disciples own quarrels over worldly ambition and longing after worldly standing, Jesus makes it absolutely clear where the path of discipleship was to lead for that group. They might not have want to hear it then, but as their lives – and deaths - bear witness the truth of the kingdom embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot call forth any false response.

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“What do we really, really, want to be?” “And how?” are key questions for defining the vision of our life together and for enabling us to live out that vision. But we must be prepared to embrace the cost of being true to that vision, the cost of embodying it in what we do and speak and pray each day – but even as we face that challenge we know that the cost of being false to the truth is far greater – for to live falsely is to risk losing all that we long for and hope for and desire, it is to risk losing our very selves.

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."